



STATE OF CONNECTICUT

OFFICE OF PROTECTION AND ADVOCACY FOR
PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
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Testimony of the Office of Protection and Advocacy for Persons with Disabilities Before the Housing Committee

Submitted by: James D. McGaughey
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Thank you for this opportunity to comment favorably on **Raised Bill 5372, An Act Concerning Accessible Housing**.

Over the past several years, our Office has been contacted by hundreds of people seeking information on the availability of accessible housing. They contacted us even though we are not a housing referral agency because they had looked everywhere and were desperate. Some were people who had recently acquired disabilities and could no longer live in their inaccessible homes, some had been living in institutional settings and wanted to move out into their own homes; others were parents raising children with disabilities, children who are getting bigger and heavier to carry up and down the stairs; yet others were looking to relocate because they wanted to pursue a promotional opportunity in their work, or because of a family need, or for any of the dozens of other reasons people need to move.

We hear about the shortage from other sources as well: participants in public forums we hold around the State to help us set service priorities; agencies we partner with that help people move out of nursing homes; and other service providers who are trying to help people "age in place" in their communities rather than have to move to congregate care facilities. There is no question that finding accessible housing is a problem in all parts of the State – urban and suburban and rural, east and west. And the shortage is especially acute for families. Much of the accessible housing that does exist assumes is for individuals – a one-bedroom flat. It is not unusual for a single person with a disability – even a person with a good income and other personal resources – to spend six to twelve months searching for an accessible apartment or condo. But families with many members – families that need lots of bedrooms and bathrooms – may look for years and still not find anything suitable.

Our Building Code requires that at least some accessible and adaptable units be constructed in new, larger multi-family housing developments. But there is no code requirement for accessibility in single family or two-family homes. As so much of Connecticut housing is comprised of these types of homes, this is a major limitation. There is considerable resistance to requiring that newly constructed homes meet accessibility requirements. Part of that resistance lies with cost factors – it often takes more floor space to meet accessibility requirements, and therefore often requires a slightly bigger building, or more exterior grading and landscaping to support ramped entrances. But part of it is just a matter of convention. For instance, for the past

several hundred years New Englanders have built their homes with a step up to their entryways. The idea was to keep melting snow from draining back under the doors. Good idea. Except that now, with good design and modern materials, we know how to prevent that from occurring without insisting on a step up to get into a house.

In fact, some New England states have moved to incorporate the concept of "visitability" of newly constructed single family homes. Visitability means that a person with a mobility disability can visit – get into a home through an accessible entrance, follow an accessible path of travel, and use a first floor bathroom. And, by the way, it also means that if someone living in that home develops a disability, they probably won't have to abruptly sell their home and move out, possibly to an expensive nursing home which they may never leave. So the social, and even the economic benefits are considerable.

This bill represents an affirmative attempt to do something about this major problem. It does not mandate, but rather creates incentives for developers and home-builders to incorporate the principles of accessible design in single-family and smaller multi-family homes. Some additional work needs to be done to reconcile the language with existing code requirements for multi-family construction. But the bill is an important first step toward solving a large and ever-growing problem in this State. Our Office would be happy to work with the Committee and other advocacy groups to help tweak its provisions as it moves forward.

Thank you for considering these remarks. If there are any questions please feel free to contact me.